

Message Text

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SUBJECT: MINTOFF FORCES CIVIL MARRIAGE BILL THROUGH PARLIAMENT

1. AS ANOTHER STEP IN HIS LONG-RUNNING CAMPAIGN TO REDRESS THE BALANCE (AS HE SEES IT) VIS-A-VIS THE POWER OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN MALTA, PRIME MINISTER MINTOFF HAS SUCCESSFULLY PUSHED THROUGH PARLIAMENT A NEW MARRIAGE BILL. THE ESSENTIAL FEATURE OF THE BILL IS THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A SYSTEM OF OPTIONAL CIVIL MARRIAGE IN MALTA, PLUS A NEW REQUIREMENT THAT RELIGIOUS MARRIAGES PERFORMED UNDER CHURCH AUSPICES MUST BE WITNESSED AND RECORDED BY GOVERNMENT-APPOINTED CIVIL REGISTRARS TO BE LEGALLY VALID. THE NEW LAW EFFECTIVELY REPLACES THE FORMER SYSTEM WHEREBY MALTESE MARRIAGES WERE GOVERNED BY CANON LAW.

2. MINTOFF'S INSISTENCE ON "UPDATING" MALTA'S MARRIAGE SYSTEM PROVOKED SERIOUS OBJECTIONS FROM THE MALTESE CATHOLIC HIERARCHY, CHURCH-ORIENTED LAY ORGANIZATIONS, AND THE OPPOSITION NATIONALIST PARTY. THESE GROUPS SAW MANY DIRE CONSEQUENCES IN ANY CHANGE IN MALTA'S CHURCH-CONTROLLED MARRIAGE PROCEDURES, INCLUDING THREATS TO THE COUNTRY'S CLOSELY-KNIT FAMILY SYSTEM THROUGH THE "INEVITABLE" DEGENERATION OF CIVIL MARRIAGES AS A RESULT OF "EASY" CIVIL ANNULMENT PROCEDURES. AND, OF COURSE, THE SPECTER OF THE ACCEPTANCE OF CIVIL DIVORCE IN CATHOLIC MALTA WAS POINTED TO AS THE NEXT LIKELY DEVELOPMENT.

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3. MINTOFF AND HIS LABOR SUPPORTERS IN PARLIAMENT EITHER IGNORED OR RIDICULED ALL ASPECTS OF THE OUTCRIES AGAINST THEIR MARRAGE BILL, MAINTAINING THAT THEY ONLY WERE TRYING TO CATCH UP WITH THE TWENTIETH CENTURY. FOR THE LABORITES, THE MAIN PRINCIPLE INVOLVED WAS THE ESTABLISHMENT OF STATE SOVEREIGNTY OVER THE NO-LONGER ACCEPTABLE EXERCISE OF INDEPENDENT CHURCH AUTHORITY WHERE MARRIAGE IS CONCERNED.

4. CHURCH GROUPS APPEALED TO THE INDIVIDUAL LABOR REPRESENTATIVES TO VOTE THEIR CONSCIENCES ON THE BILL, RATHER THAN FOLLOWING PARTY DISCIPLINE, HOPING TO OVERCOME (FOR ONCE) MINTOFF'S SOLID 29 VOTE PHALANX IN THE 55-SEAT PARLIAMENT. BUT TO NO AVAIL, THE LABOR RANKS HELD FIRM, AND EVERY EFFORT BY THE NATIONALISTS TO REVISE OR AMEND THE BILL TO SOFTEN ITS IMPACT ON MALTA'S "CATHOLIC MARRIAGE SYSTEM" FAILED.

5. AFTER TWO WEEKS OF PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE, MINTOFF INVOKED CLOTURE TO CUT OFF FURTHER DISCUSSION, THROUGH THE ADOPTION OF A "GUILLotine" MOTION, MUCH TO THE ANNOYANCE OF THE FRUSTRATED NATIONALISTS. DURING THE FINAL STATE OF CONSIDERATION, THE NATIONALISTS INSISTED ON DIVISIONS ON MANY SECTIONS OF THE BILL, WHILE ATTEMPTING TO INTRODUCE CHANGES AND AMENDMENTS. ALL OF THE NATIONALIST EFFORTS WERE BRUSHED ASIDE, AND AS A LAST INDIGNITY THE OPPOSITION CALL FOR A DIVISION ON THE FINAL READING OF THE BILL WAS DENIED BY THE SPEAKER AS BEING FRIVOLOUS, SINCE SO MANY VOTES HAD ALREADY BEEN TAKEN. THE NEW MARRIAGE BILL WAS PASSED ON JULY 30.

6. COMMENT: SEVERAL ASPECTS OF THIS PECULIARLY-MALTESE POLITICAL CONTRETEMPS ARE WORTH NOTING. FIRST, THE EPISODE ILLUSTRATED MINTOFF'S CONTINUED BITTERNESS AGAINST PREVIOUS CHURCH INTERFERENCE IN POLITICAL AFFAIRS IN MALTA, AND HIS ABSOLUTE UNWILLINGNESS TO SEEK COMPROMISE WITH THE CHURCH (OR ITS SUPPORTERS) ON CURRENT ISSUES. SECOND, IT DEMONSTRATED MINTOFF'S SINGLE-MINDEDNESS WHEN HE DECIDES THAT PARLIAMENTARY ACTION IS DESIRED OR NECESSARY ON A PARTICULAR ISSUE (THE LABOR PARTY HAD NO ELECTORAL MANDATE TO INSTITUTE CIVIL MARRIAGE), AND HIS DISDAIN OF NATIONALIST OPINION TO THE CONTRARY. THIRD, IT ONCE AGAIN PROVED THE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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STRENGTH OF LABOR PARTY PARLIAMENTARY DISCIPLINE, EVEN ON A SUBJECT WHERE THE PRIVATE BELIEFS OF AT LEAST SOME LABOR MP'S MIGHT WELL HAVE BEEN LESS ADAMANT THAN THOSE OF MINTOFF. BORG OLIVIER AND THE NATIONALIST MP'S TRIED HARD TO MOUNT AN EFFECTIVE COUNTERATTACK THIS TIME, BUT AS USUAL, MINTOFF FLEXED HIS MUSCLES AND HAD HIS WAY. SMITH

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